

The Builder.

No. CCXL.

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OR the last two or three weeks we have put aside the various letters which have reached us concerning the estimating system, the present mode of executing work, the position of builders, their oppression by architects, and their impositions on ditto. Need we say that these form a curious pile of contradictory import? One builder who wrote ten days ago, inclosing a list of tenders showing a ruinous or knavish difference in the amounts (his being about the average) is pointed out, this week, by a second builder as being the lowest of nine in another matter, and 40 per cent. under the highest; an "Experienced Architect" shows that the most stringent clauses in a contract do not enable him to get his work done satisfactorily, unless the contractor be a respectable man; and a "Young Beginner" urges that it is shameful that he should be placed entirely at the mercy of architects, as he considers he is when forced to sign an undertaking to leave all matters in dispute to their decision. And while the latter, in continuation, complains that so few opportunities of tendering are afforded to young builders, in consequence of architects always sending to nearly the same set of men for estimates, instead of publicly advertising for tenders—another writer denounces altogether the system of tendering at a sum, makes various suggestions of too restrictive a tendency to be listened to in these times, and calls on the builders as a body to refuse to contract, excepting on a schedule of prices.* One thus answers another.

In the course of the last letter the writer says:—"It is very much to be regretted, that when builders have just had their eyes opened to the evil, and that most of our public boards have abandoned the system of contracting by the lump, as it is termed, the only board which for many years led the van in the improvement of the system of contracts in building has fallen back upon this old, and, I should hope, nearly expiring, system. I mean, with all due respect, the Board of Ordnance, under which for many years I have contracted by the schedule system, by which I could live; but now that the contract system of estimates has been introduced, as a respectable individual I must, amongst many others of the same class, give place to men of inferior pretensions, and who, it is beginning to be notoriously known in that service, are giving much inconvenience to the officers of the board."

Of the evil results of the present system no person acquainted with it can entertain a

doubt,—construction, credit, and the morals of a large class are all injured by it to a fearful extent. The advance of skill in our operatives is prevented, the fair trader is made to look like a rogue, the uninformed builder is ruined, and the knavish one led to ruin others.

The extraordinary differences constantly to be observed can only be ascribed to error or fraud: look, for example, at one of the most recent lists of tenders submitted to us,—tenders for the erection of a parsonage house at Homerton, whereof the highest of nine was 2,173*l.*, and the lowest 1,286*l.** And what makes this the more extraordinary is, that the quantities, if we are rightly informed, were, as is often the case, supplied to all the parties; so that a main opportunity for mistakes was got rid of. Comment is unnecessary.

Again, look in our report (this week) of the proceedings of the Westminster Sewers' Commissioners, and it will be seen that, while one builder put down the sum of 1,112*l.*, as the cost of 1,825 feet of sewer, another undertook to do it for 779*l.* The number of bricks required to do a yard of this sewer, the quantity of lime and sand for mortar, the time occupied in laying the bricks, the extent of digging, and the positive cost of all these items, are as well known as that two and two make four; and yet, by some means or other, the tenders for executing a given quantity of the sewer run (in round numbers), 1,100*l.*, 1,000*l.*, 900*l.*, 850*l.*, and 780*l.* :

One of the letters, to which we are thus generally referring, made a statement to which we were not disposed in the first instance to give the slightest credit, as it reflected severely on the honour and honesty of a large body of men. It was to the effect, that when a limited number of builders are invited to send in, it is not unusual for them to agree among themselves as to who shall be the successful competitor, and then to send in merely nominal tenders, something over the amount named by the selected party. That this system is practised to any extent we cannot for one moment think; indeed, we can scarcely believe in isolated instances of it: but we have learnt with pain, from two builders of good standing, who mentioned the fact as if it were of such constant occurrence as scarcely to need concealment, that it was not unusual with them, when indisposed or unable to accept an invitation to tender, to learn the amount about to be sent in by one of the other parties who might be known to them, and forward a tender at a larger sum.

They could scarcely think that they were practising a gross deception on parties who trusted them, and that, carried to the extreme, they might be aiding to rob them,—that they were telling a mean lie, of which in any other shape we consider them incapable, believing that they not merely think

"Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,
Is th' immediate jewel of their souls,"

and so would preserve it in the ears of the world, but that they would be good for goodness' own sake, and in obedience to a High command.

Let them refuse to tender in competition if they please, and can afford it,—they shall have our praise for the refusal; but do not let them aid in making an architect believe that he has the conscientious opinion of several experienced men as to the cost of the works his

employer requires—the price which each honestly puts upon his wares—when in reality he has nothing of the sort. Want of thought could alone lead right-thinking men to act thus fraudulently.

We have but opened the subject, and shall speedily return to it.

SOME ACCOUNT OF THE CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF S. MARIA DEI FIORI, AT FLORENCE:

And Description of the Design for a New Elevation to the West End, by the Cavalierre Matteo Archetti.

THE very name of Florence excites a deep interest in the minds of all acquainted with Italian history or attached to the literature of classic Greece, or who are versed in the revival of letters on the banks of the Arno. The names of the Medici and of Dante, of Michaelangelo, Galileo, and Machiavelli, present themselves to one's view; and memory dwells upon the extent of the commercial relations of the merchant princes of the City of Flowers, or the skill, the intelligence and enterprise of her great men, and the desolating contests of the Guelph and Ghibellini. The triple-arched bridge of the Trinity, which spans most gracefully the Arno, a miracle of science and taste; the fortress palaces of the Strozzi and Riccardi, her stupendous cupola of Sta. Maria dei Fiori, and the profusion of works of high art which embellish even her grand dual piazza, announce a thinking, an art-cultivating and imaginative people, full of intense feeling.

Her metropolitan cathedral now alone claims our attention,—a worthy object for our consideration; for its vastness attests at once the noble piety of a generous and wealthy people, who could contemplate and at once undertake so gigantic an enterprise; and to its realization were consecrated the expanding genius of Arnolfo and Giotto, themselves lights in an age of artistic darkness, and the native science of the daring Brunelleschi, who, amidst the majestic construction of the temples and baths of ancient Rome, had, with a noble ambition, prepared himself for executing in his native city a cupola, which equals in size that of St. Peter's at Rome, and precedes it in date by a century and a half.

We will now proceed to the history and description of the church.

This cathedral is situated in the centre of a vast open space. In front of it and totally distinct, at a short distance, is the octagonal baptistery—an arrangement of usual occurrence in the earlier churches of various parts of Italy, and in imitation of the position of the baptistery of Constantine, near the Church of the Lateran at Rome. This relative position of the church and baptistery indicated that the neophyte could only enter the church by baptism. Near the south-west angle of the nave is the exquisite campanile of Giotto—a perfect gem in design and execution, graceful in form and profuse in marble. This also is an usual arrangement, which exists most strikingly at Pisa.

It appears that there was an ancient cathedral church on the very same spot as the present, but in what style of art, whether of Italian Gothic as at Orvieto, or the Tedesco or German taste of Pisa, is not recorded. In 1294 the Florentine senate decreed that the old cathedral should be rebuilt, and in 1296 the works commenced under the direction of Arnolfo, who, however, died thirty-two years afterwards, and was succeeded by Giotto in 1334. Arnolfo was both an architect and sculptor, a combination of studies and occupations which has seldom if ever been successful. He apparently followed, in the nave, the usual Gothic arrangement, adhering possibly to the original plan of the old cathedral; but instead of the ordinary combination of transepts, we find a bold departure from previous practice by the introduction of a large octagonal vestibule flanked by three chapels, and surmounted by its enormous dome—a daring transition from established ideas to a new epoch.

For one hundred years these works proceeded gradually although slowly, for we find that it was not until 1376 orders were issued to commence the piers of the cupola; and at

* The following are the suggestions alluded to—

1st. That the builders of London should assemble at periods not exceeding one in every three months having first held preliminary meetings, at which a standard schedule of prices should be framed, based upon calculations from the current prices of the day for each locality, then quarterly meetings being held with the view of altering such prices as the state of the markets, or other local circumstances may require.

2nd. That those prices be calculated so as to allow a fair living profit and per centage upon the cost; and that they be classed in subdivisions of works commencing from the price of any one of the subdivisions, that works not exceeding that value should be higher in the price of each particular item than works for less, or more, and so on in proportion.

3rd. That the builders in each locality bind themselves not to work for less than the prices agreed upon by their locality, under penalty; but that they may propose to execute the works at any degree or amount of per centage above those prices of schedule which to them seem desirable.

4th. That all works executed by builders be measured and valued according with the standard schedule of the locality in which the work is performed, by a competent surveyor; and that in no case a system of estimating be permitted by the Custom of the Craft, or whatever other term they may think fit to adopt.

5th. That a general central committee be appointed to watch over the interests of the trade, claiming from Parliament a power to restrain fraudulent builders or inexperienced persons from carrying on the business of the craft.

* This is the list, and a startling one it is—

Jay	£11.7
Lowrance	2.17
Whitney and Maynes	2.11
Nelson	2.03
Mansfield	1.99
Trop	1.92
Jurley	1.79
Curtis	1.62
Horrie	1.52
Crook and Son	1.34

* Read at the Institute of Architects, by Professor Donaldson, on the 10th inst.